

# Authentic Leadership in the UK Retail Sector: Exploring Employee Experiences and the Emergence of Authentic Followership

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## Abstract

This phenomenological study explores employees' experiences of authentic leadership within the UK retail industry, addressing the gap in understanding how authentic leadership influences followers. Rooted in the principle of 'Know thyself,' authentic leadership emphasizes self-awareness, relational transparency, and moral values to foster positive work environments, employee well-being, and organizational sustainability. The research investigates the perceptions of 14 employees working under authentic leaders, using in-depth interviews to uncover their professional and personal experiences. Four key themes emerged: Genuine and Positive Attitude, Building Informal Relations, Formal Relations, and Professional Aptitude. These themes highlight how authentic leadership promotes honesty, trust, and strong interpersonal relationships, ultimately contributing to authentic followership. The study proposes a model of authentic followership based on these findings, aligning with existing theories while introducing new dimensions. A comprehensive review of leadership literature underscores the importance of leaders guiding followers toward shared goals while prioritizing their well-being and empowerment. The findings suggest that authentic leadership enhances organizational vibrancy and productivity, with implications for both private and public sectors. Further research is recommended to explore authentic leadership experiences across diverse industries and cultural contexts, providing deeper insights into its transformative potential for employees and organizations alike.

**Keywords:** *Authentic leadership, sustainability, followership, organizational vibrancy*

**JEL Classification:** M12, D23, L12

## Introduction

This study explores authentic leadership qualitatively through the lens of followers' perceptions, using a phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994) with an interpretive perspective. Transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Yamoah & Haque, 2022) is applied to understand employees' lived experiences, focusing on setting aside preconceived ideas (epoche) to uncover the true meaning of phenomena. The research aims to

identify a leadership style based on authenticity and moral values that foster authentic followership and job satisfaction in fast-paced work environments.

Leadership is defined as the ability to influence people toward achieving goals, with credibility rooted in ethical and transparent practices (Hughes et al., 2010; Haque et al., 2015). Authentic leadership, a growing area of interest, emphasizes self-awareness, relational transparency, and moral values to create positive work environments and employee well-being (George, 2003; Avolio et al., 2004). However, limited qualitative research exists on employees' experiences under authentic leadership, particularly in the UK retail sector. This study addresses this gap by exploring how authentic leadership influences employees and fosters authentic followership.

The study focuses on the UK retail industry, a vital sector for the economy, employing millions and contributing significantly to GDP. The research is significant as it provides qualitative insights into authentic leadership, a less-explored area, and proposes a model for authentic followership development. It benefits academics, practitioners, and professionals by enhancing understanding of how authentic leadership impacts employee experiences and organizational outcomes.

The aim is to explore employees' experiences under authentic leadership, understand the context of these experiences, and investigate the development of authentic followership. The study seeks to contribute to the literature by providing qualitative insights and proposing strategies for improving workplace practices.

The research questions focus on understanding employees' experiences under authentic leaders and identifying components of authentic leadership that lead to authentic followership. A qualitative, phenomenological approach is used, with in-depth interviews conducted with 14 participants from the UK retail industry. The study aims to contribute to the literature by providing qualitative insights into authentic leadership and proposing a model for authentic followership development.

## **Literature Review**

Authentic leadership has gained significant attention in recent years, with key contributions from scholars like William L. Gardner, Bruce J. Avolio, Remus Ilies, and Bill George. These authors have developed foundational models that are widely referenced in literature. However, there is a noticeable gap in recent developments, particularly in addressing current market dynamics and leadership practices. Gundona et al. (2023) argued that customer engagement can increase brand performance. However, is there any role of authentic leader in making customer engagement better or not, is still not clear. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring authentic leadership through the lens of followers' experiences, using a phenomenological approach.

### *Leadership: Definitions and Evolution*

Leadership has been studied for over a century, with early theories like the Great Man Theory (Carlyle, 184) suggesting that leaders are born, not made. This theory was later challenged by Herbert Spencer (1860), who argued that leaders are shaped by social conditions (Luthans et al., 2021). Over time, leadership theories evolved, focusing on traits, behaviors, and situational factors. Key definitions include:

- Leadership as a process of influencing group activities toward goal achievement (Stogdill, 1974).
- Leadership as the ability to inspire and motivate followers (Bass, 1990).

- Leadership as a social influence process that supports and helps others achieve tasks (Chemers, 1997).

Despite numerous definitions, leadership remains a complex and context-dependent concept, with no universal agreement on its core attributes. Recent studies emphasize the importance of authenticity as a critical leadership trait, particularly in fostering trust and ethical behavior.

### *Development of Leadership Theories*

Leadership theories have evolved from trait-based and behavioral approaches to more relational and transformational models. Key theories include:

- Trait Theory (1930s): Focused on innate qualities like emotional stability, conscientiousness, and extraversion (Luthans et al., 2021).
- Behavioral Theory (1940s-1950s): Emphasized learned behaviors and the importance of employee-oriented leadership (Luthans et al., 2021).
- Situational Theory (Hersey and Blanchard, 1969): Suggested that leadership style should adapt to the situation and followers' maturity levels.
- Transformational Leadership (Burns, 1978): Highlighted the role of leaders in inspiring and transforming followers through vision and moral values.

These theories laid the groundwork for modern leadership concepts, including authentic leadership, which integrates ethical, relational, and self-aware dimensions.

### *Authentic Leadership: Conceptual Foundations*

Authentic leadership emerged in the early 2000s as a response to the need for ethical and transparent leadership practices. Key contributors include:

- Luthans and Avolio (2003): Introduced authentic leadership as a root construct rooted in positive psychology and self-awareness.
- George (2003): Emphasized the importance of authenticity, moral values, and self-discipline in leadership.
- Gardner et al. (2005): Proposed a model linking authentic leadership to follower development through self-awareness and self-regulation.

Authentic leadership is characterized by four key dimensions:

- Self-awareness: Understanding one's values, emotions, and impact on others.
- Relational transparency: Being open and honest in interactions.
- Balanced processing: Objectively analyzing information before making decisions.
- Internalized moral perspective: Acting in alignment with ethical standards.

These dimensions form the basis of authentic leadership models and have been widely adopted in research and practice.

### *Authentic Followership*

Authentic leadership is closely linked to authentic followership, where followers develop trust and commitment through their leader's authenticity. Key studies include:

- Gardner et al. (2005): Highlighted the role of authentic leaders in fostering follower self-awareness and self-regulation.
- Leroy et al. (2015): Found that authentic leadership satisfies followers' basic psychological needs (competence, relatedness, autonomy), leading to higher job satisfaction and performance.
- Braun and Peus (2018): Emphasized the importance of authentic leaders in creating positive work environments and promoting employee well-being.

Despite these insights, authentic followership remains understudied, with limited research on how followers perceive and develop authenticity in response to their leaders.

### *Contemporary Research on Authentic Leadership*

Recent studies have focused on the impact of authentic leadership on employee outcomes, particularly in the post-COVID-19 era. Key findings include:

- Baquero (2023): Found that authentic leadership constructs (relational transparency, internalized moral perspective, balanced processing) positively impact work engagement and trust in leaders.
- Mao et al. (2023): Demonstrated that authentic leadership enhances employee resilience during crises, mediated by trust and organizational identification.
- Towsen et al. (2020): Linked authentic leadership to psychological empowerment and work engagement in the mining sector.
- Duarte et al. (2021): Showed that authentic leadership improves employee performance through affective commitment and creativity.

While these studies provide valuable insights, they predominantly use quantitative methods and focus on established constructions, leaving room for qualitative exploration of followers' experiences and the development of new dimensions.

### *Gaps in Literature*

Despite extensive research, several gaps remain:

- Lack of Qualitative Studies: Most research relies on quantitative methods, limiting deeper understanding of followers' lived experiences.
- Understudied Followership: Authentic followership has received less attention compared to authentic leadership.
- Context-Specific Research: Few studies explore authentic leadership in the retail sector, which plays a vital role in the economy.
- Post-COVID-19 Dynamics: The pandemic has reshaped workplace dynamics, yet there is limited research on how authentic leadership adapts to these changes.

This study addresses these gaps by using a qualitative, phenomenological approach to explore authentic leadership in the UK retail sector, focusing on followers' experiences and the development of authentic followership.

## **Research Methodology**

### *Qualitative Research Methods*

Qualitative research is widely used in social sciences to explore human experiences, behaviors, and social phenomena. Unlike quantitative methods, which rely on numerical data and statistical analysis, qualitative research focuses on understanding the “why” and “how” behind human actions. It employs methods such as interviews, observations, and content analysis to gather rich, detailed data (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore employees' experiences under authentic leadership, as it allows for an in-depth understanding of their perceptions and lived experiences.

### *Phenomenological Research Design*

Phenomenology, as proposed by Moustakas (1994), is the chosen research design for this study. It focuses on understanding the “lived experiences” of individuals and the meaning they attach to those experiences. This approach is particularly suited for exploring how employees perceive and experience authentic leadership in their workplace. Phenomenology involves:

- **Epoche:** Setting aside preconceived ideas and biases to understand the phenomenon through the participants' perspectives.
- **Phenomenological Reduction:** Analyzing the essence of participants' experiences by focusing on their descriptions.
- **Horizontalizing:** Identifying significant statements from participants' narratives and clustering them into themes.

This design allows the researcher to delve deeply into the participants' experiences, providing a holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

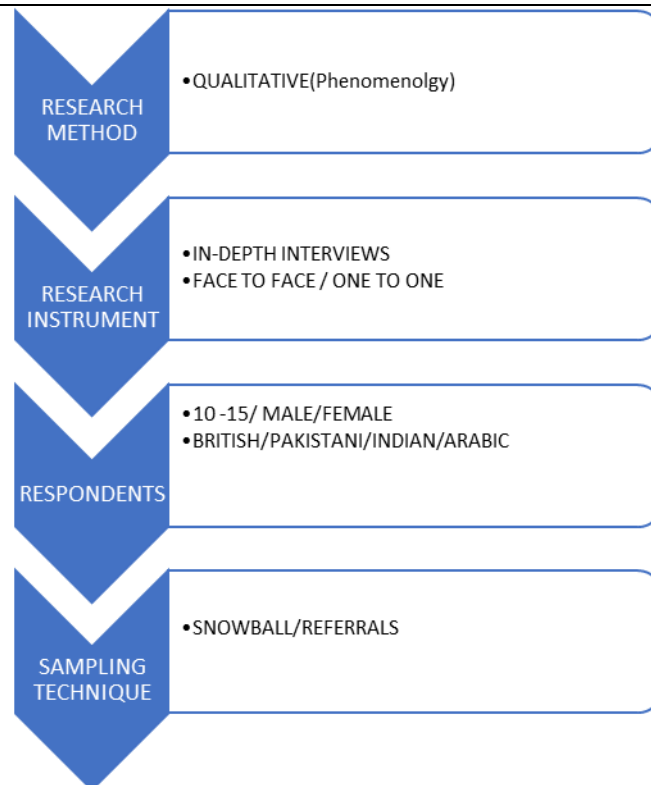
### *Research Paradigm and Philosophy*

The study adopts an interpretivist research paradigm, which emphasizes understanding social phenomena through the subjective experiences of individuals. Interpretivism aligns with the study's goal of exploring employees' perceptions and experiences of authentic leadership. The research philosophy is guided by:

- **Ontology:** The belief that reality is socially constructed and varies based on individual experiences.
- **Epistemology:** The understanding that knowledge is gained through interpretation and interaction with participants.
- **Axiology:** The recognition of the researcher's values and biases, which are acknowledged and bracketed during the study.

This paradigm ensures that the research remains focused on understanding the subjective experiences of employees rather than seeking objective, general truths.

### *Data Collection*



**Figure 1:** author's illustration - data collection process

Data was collected through in-depth interviews with 14 employees from the UK retail sector who had worked under authentic leaders. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing participants to share their experiences freely while ensuring key topics were covered. Each interview lasted 1-2 hours and was conducted in a natural setting to ensure participants felt comfortable and open. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

### *Sampling Technique*

A non-probability sampling approach was used, combining snowball, purposive, and convenience sampling techniques. Participants were selected based on their experience working under authentic leaders and their willingness to share detailed narratives. The sample size was determined using thematic saturation, where no new themes emerged after 11 interviews, with three additional interviews confirming the saturation point.

### *Research Instrument and Pilot Testing*

The primary research instrument was a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions. A pilot study was conducted with four employees from a similar retail setting to refine the questions and ensure clarity. The final interview guide focused on participants' experiences, perceptions, and the impact of authentic leadership on their professional and personal lives.

### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis followed Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological approach, which includes:

- Epoche: Bracketing the researcher's biases and preconceptions.
- Phenomenological Reduction: Identifying significant statements from participants'

narratives.

- Horizontalizing: Clustering statements into themes and sub-themes.
- Imaginative Variation: Reflecting on the themes to uncover the essence of the participants' experiences.
- Thematic analysis was used to organize and interpret the data, with themes emerging from participants' descriptions of their experiences. The analysis process involved:
  - Coding: Assigning labels to significant statements.
  - Reduction and Elimination: Removing repetitive or irrelevant statements.
  - Thematic Clustering: Grouping codes into broader themes.

### *Ethical Considerations*

The study adhered to strict ethical guidelines, including:

- Informed Consent: Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose and their rights.
- Confidentiality: All data was anonymized, and participants' identities were protected.
- Voluntary Participation: Participants were free to withdraw at any time without consequences.
- Minimizing Harm: The research topic was non-sensitive, focusing on positive experiences, and participants were assured of their emotional and physical safety.

### *Triangulation*

To ensure the study's validity and reliability, triangulation was employed by:

- Using multiple data sources (interviews, observations).
- Cross-checking findings with existing literature on authentic leadership.
- Ensuring consistency in data collection and analysis methods.

### *Summary of methodology*

The qualitative, phenomenological approach adopted in this study provides a robust framework for exploring employees' experiences of authentic leadership. By focusing on the participants' lived experiences, the study aims to uncover the essence of authentic leadership and its impact on employees, contributing to both academic knowledge and practical insights for organizational leadership.

## **Findings and Discussions**

The findings are categorized into four main themes based on the attributes of the manager's personality as perceived by employees. These themes reflect the manager's authenticity, relationship-building skills, professional aptitude, and leadership style.

### *Main Theme 1: Genuine and Positive Attitude*

This theme reflects the manager's authentic and kind-hearted nature, characterized by politeness, honesty, and approachability.

**Table 1:** Responses about Genuine and Positive Attitude

Polite and Kind	"She always treats employees as family. She never speaks harshly, even
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	if someone is wrong.” (Participant 9)
	“He listens calmly and tries to make situations better. He is kindhearted and supportive.” (Participant 2)
Honesty	“She is very honest with the company, her work, and her staff.” (Participant 7)
	“He never hides anything. He always tells us the clear picture.” (Participant 1)
Easily Approachable	“He always smiles and makes you feel safe. You never hesitate to approach him.” (Participant 10)
	“She is always there to help, no matter the issue.” (Participant 9)
	“He always smiles and makes you feel safe. You never hesitate to approach him.” (Participant 10)
	“She is always there to help, no matter the issue.” (Participant 9)

Source: *author’s illustration about qualitative findings*

Participants consistently described their manager as kind, patient, and caring. Employees felt valued and supported, even when mistakes were made. Moreover, the manager’s kindness created a stress-free and supportive work environment, fostering emotional connections with employees. Honesty was a key trait, with the manager being transparent and trustworthy. In addition to that, employees appreciated the manager’s transparency, especially during challenging times like hour reductions or financial adjustments. The manager’s friendly and welcoming demeanor made employees feel comfortable sharing personal and professional concerns. This approachability fostered trust and strong emotional bonds between the manager and employees.

### *Main Theme 2: Informal Relations*

This theme highlights the manager’s efforts to build relationships beyond formal duties, focusing on rewards, respect, flexibility, and personal support.

**Table 2:** Responses about information relations

Rewards and Perks	“He gave us gifts and appreciation for our efforts. It made us feel valued.” (Participant 2)
Respect as a Key to Building Relationships	“He treats everyone equally, whether junior or senior. There’s no discrimination.” (Participant 9)
Flexibility Approach	“She always supports me with my schedule, especially with my kids.” (Participant 7) “He treats everyone equally, whether junior or senior. There’s no discrimination.” (Participant 9)
Helping Employees with Personal Matters	“He financially helped me during a tough time. I’ll never forget his kindness.” (Participant 4)

Source: *author’s illustration about qualitative findings*

Findings revealed that the manager recognized and rewarded employees’ hard work, creating a motivating environment. The manager recognized and rewarded employees’ hard work, creating a motivating environment. In addition to that, respect was central to the manager’s interactions, ensuring equality and fairness. The manager accommodated employees’ personal needs, such as health issues or family responsibilities. Lastly, the manager went beyond professional duties to



assist employees with personal challenges.

*Main Theme 3: Formal Relations*

This theme focuses on the manager’s professional role, including problem-solving, empowering employees, and fostering a collaborative work environment.

**Table 3:** Responses about Formal Relations

Problem Solver	“She always finds solutions before problems escalate.” (Participant 9)
Empowering Slow Learners	“She worked hard to teach a slow learner, and now he’s one of our best employees.” (Participant 7)
Early Familiarization with Work Environment	“On my first day, he made me feel comfortable and assured me I could ask for help anytime.” (Participant 1)
Co-Worker	“He didn’t just give orders; he worked with us, even doing tasks like cleaning.” (Participant 2)

Source: *author’s illustration about qualitative findings*

Findings revealed that the manager was proactive in resolving issues and listening to feedback. Moreover, the manager provided tailored support to employees with learning difficulties. It is also evident that the new employees were warmly welcomed and supported. Furthermore, the manager often worked alongside employees, leading by example.

*Main Theme 4: Professional Aptitude*

This theme reflects the manager’s professional skills, including goal focus, planning, and adherence to company rules.

**Table 4:** Responses about Professional Aptitude

Goal Focused	“He never let personal issues affect his work. He was always dedicated.” (Participant 5)
Good Planner	“He always planned ahead, making sure we were prepared for promotions or busy days.” (Participant 2)
Employees’ Retention Skills	“He always found ways to keep us motivated and happy at work.” (Participant 10)
Self-Control	“She never lost her temper, even with angry customers.” (Participant 7)
Following Company Rules	“He never broke the rules, and he expected the same from us.” (Participant 9)

Source: *author’s illustration about qualitative findings*

Results showed that the manager prioritized work commitments, even during personal challenges. In addition to that effective planning ensured daily targets were met without overburdening employees. Moreover, the manager retained employees by addressing their concerns and offering flexibility. Interestingly, the manager remained calm and composed, even in stressful situations. Lastly, the manager strictly adhered to company policies, setting an example for employees.

The findings reveal four main themes clearly interlinked with authentic leadership traits among

managers in the UK's retail sector:

- Genuine and Positive Attitude: Kindness, honesty, and approachability.
- Informal Relations: Rewards, respect, flexibility, and personal support.
- Formal Relations: Problem-solving, empowerment, and collaboration.
- Professional Aptitude: Goal focus, planning, and adherence to rules.

These themes highlight the manager's authenticity, emotional intelligence, and ability to build strong, trust-based relationships with employees. The findings align with the principles of authentic leadership, emphasizing self-awareness, transparency, and moral integrity.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The study identified four main themes based on employees' perceptions of authentic leadership: Genuine and Positive Attitude, Informal Relations, Formal Relations, and Professional Aptitude. These themes align with existing literature on authentic leadership while introducing new insights. Employees described their managers as kind, honest, and approachable. The manager's kindness and patience in handling mistakes fostered a supportive work environment. This aligns with George's (2003) model of authentic leadership, which emphasizes leading with heart and building emotional connections. The findings also resonate with Luthans and Avolio (2003) and Walumbwa et al. (2008), who highlight the importance of self-awareness and moral standards in authentic leadership.

- Polite and Kind: Employees felt valued and supported, even when errors occurred. This reflects the leader's ability to lead with empathy and compassion.
- Honesty: Transparency in communication and actions-built trust among employees, aligning with George's (2010) emphasis on relational transparency.
- Easily Approachable: A new theme emerged, highlighting the manager's friendly and welcoming demeanor, which created a safe and comfortable work environment.

This theme focuses on the manager's efforts to build relationships beyond formal duties, including rewards, respect, flexibility, and personal support. These practices align with the self-awareness dimension of authentic leadership (Luthans and Avolio, 2003; Gardner et al., 2005).

- Rewards and Perks: Recognizing employees' hard work through rewards and perks fostered motivation and engagement.
- Flexibility: A new theme, flexibility, emerged as managers accommodated employees' personal needs, promoting work-life balance and well-being.

Managers were seen as problem solvers, mentors, and co-workers, focusing on professional development and empowerment. This aligns with the self-regulation dimension of authentic leadership (Luthans and Avolio, 2003).

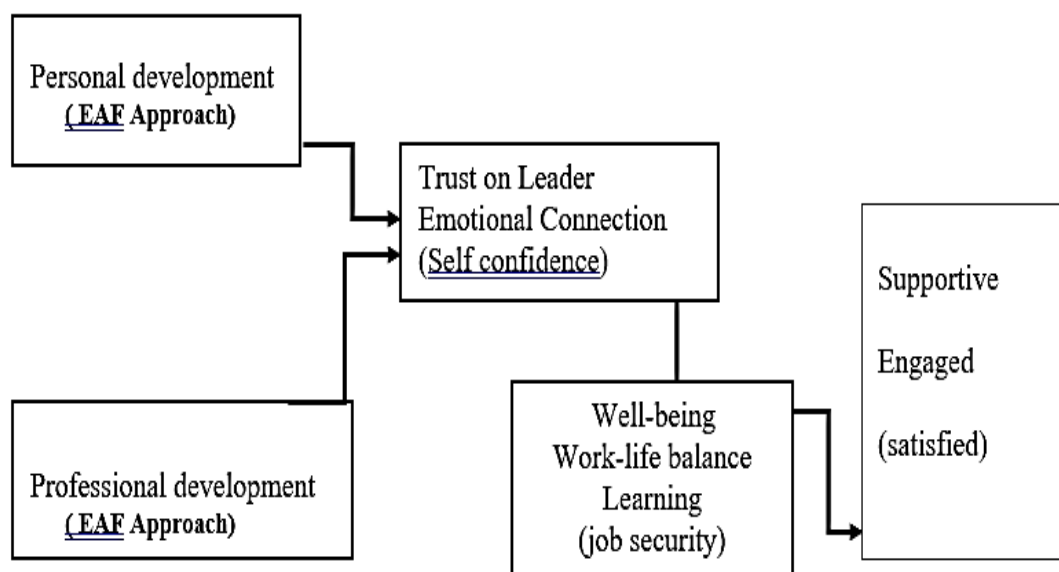
- Empowering Slow Learners: Managers provided tailored support to employees with learning difficulties, transforming them into skilled workers.
- Co-Worker: Managers worked alongside employees, leading by example and fostering a collaborative environment.
- Theme 4: Professional Aptitude
- Managers demonstrated strong professional skills, including goal focus, planning, and adherence to company rules. This aligns with the self-regulation and internalized moral perspective dimensions of authentic leadership (Luthans and Avolio, 2003; Gardner et al.,

2005).

- Goal Focused: Managers prioritized work commitments, even during personal challenges.
- Self-Control: Managers remained calm and composed, even in stressful situations, reflecting emotional regulation.

The above findings define two major areas of Authentic followership development: Personal development and Professional development. Personal development is comprised of Theme 1(Genuine and positive attitude) and Theme2 (Informal relations) while the professional area relates to Theme 2 (Formal relations) and Theme 4(Professional aptitude). The findings further led to discovery of ‘EAF approach’ based on new sub themes (Easily approachable and flexible) identified under this study which promotes well-being, work-life balance and job security in followers that consequently effect on job satisfaction and wilful engagement of the followers.

*Authentic followership development (AFD) model*



\*\*EAF approach (Easily approachable and flexible)

Source: *Authentic Followership Development Model based on findings of this study*

*Contributions to Theory*

- New Themes: The study introduced new themes, such as flexibility and easily approachability, which were not previously explored in authentic leadership literature.
- Authentic Followership Model: The study developed an Authentic Followership Development Model, highlighting the importance of personal and professional development in fostering authentic followership.
- Qualitative Insight: Unlike previous quantitative studies, this research provided a deep qualitative understanding of employees’ experiences under authentic leadership.

*Contributions to Practice*

- Leadership Development: The findings can guide leadership training programs, emphasizing kindness, transparency, and flexibility.
- Workplace Strategies: Retail organizations can implement flexible work policies, feedback

systems, and recognition programs to enhance employee well-being and engagement.

- Employee Retention: By prioritizing work-life balance and well-being, organizations can retain talented employees and foster a positive workplace culture.

#### *Recommendations for organizations*

- Prioritize Work-Life Balance: Implement flexible work policies to support employees' personal and professional needs.
- Foster Transparency: Encourage open communication and honesty to build trust between leaders and employees.
- Recognize and Reward: Establish recognition programs to appreciate employees' hard work and contributions.
- Feedback Systems: Regularly collect employee feedback to identify areas for improvement and promote a positive work environment.

#### *Recommendations for Future Research*

- Expand Sample Size: Include diverse participants from various sectors to enhance generalizability.
- Longitudinal Studies: Conduct long-term studies to observe changes in employee experience over time.
- Quantitative Analysis: Combine qualitative insights with quantitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of authentic leadership.
- Gender Perspectives: Explore how gender influences authentic leadership practices and employee experiences.

#### *Research limitations*

- Sample Size and Scope: The study focused on a single retail organization in the UK, limiting generalizability.
- Researcher Bias: The researcher's prior experience in the retail sector may have influenced data interpretation.
- Cross-Sectional Design: The study's findings are based on a single point in time, which may not capture long-term trends.

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